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Investigating the Nature and Value of Public Philosophy from the Pragmatists' Perspective

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Abstract

As a professional philosopher that has participated in public philosophy forums for several years, I attempt to determine the character and value of public philosophy. To do this I adopt the perspective of Deweyan pragmatism, which I argue provides an effective theoretical framework for this purpose. Thinking particularly about relatively small, person-to-person philosophical forums, I argue that they share the main assumptions of the pragmatic method: a prevailing contingency with regard to starting points and conclusions, a willingness to entertain evidence from various sources and disciplines, and a commitment to continuing conversation on a variety of issues for the sake of continued growth and expansion of understanding. I believe it is unlikely that these sorts of conversations will deliver any immediate or obvious results in terms of improved democratic processes at the level of an entire community or nation because of the small scale and relatively narrow appeal. However, as a resource for intellectual growth, public philosophical forums provide an invaluable resource for those individuals willing to participate, professional philosophers included.

Introduction

No one needs specialized training to discuss the “big questions”—the philosophical issues that have engaged professional philosophers for centuries. Socrates, the untrained public philosopher *par excellence*, thought it the duty of everyone to engage in philosophical reflection, and the fact that the *Apology* is still standard fare in introductory courses suggests his enthusiasm is as relevant today as it was two millennia ago. While some bemoan what appear to be dwindling opportunities for public discourse, particularly on philosophical issues, it's also clear that the internet has provided a wealth of forums of various types.¹ And despite a marked decrease in some of the traditional public forums, notably the

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discussions fueled by liberal arts majors on college campuses, there are also efforts underway to bring people together for the old-fashioned, face-to-face discussions reminiscent of Socrates' Athens. As a professional who moderates several of these latter sorts of forums, I have long been interested in determining what value public philosophizing has for the participants, for society at large, and for the practice of professional philosophy.

We might begin by asking what sort of philosophy is best used to characterize these public exchanges. What are its goals? What are its methods? How does it compare to the practice of academic philosophy? Writing as a professional philosopher, I would like to suggest a theoretical perspective from which we might articulate the merit of public philosophy. Specifically, I suggest that we evaluate it from the point of view of the pragmatists, particularly the tradition influenced by John Dewey. Public philosophy, I argue, shares the pragmatists' views about the practice of philosophy—for example, that it is non-foundationalist, open ended with respect to the goal of philosophical discussion, and inclusive of non-philosophical disciplines as part of the discourse. I am not claiming that pragmatism is the only avenue from which we might substantively assess public philosophy, but I think there is strong agreement between the practice and expectations of public philosophizing and the role that pragmatists see for philosophy, such that the pragmatist perspective allows us to articulate the value of these conversations quite effectively.

I. The Nature of Public Philosophical Discourse

I will begin with a description of what I have in mind when referring to public philosophy. While the internet has provided a variety of new forums, my own experience is mostly with moderating discussion in public places with bodily present participants. It's worth noting that there are real differences between the sorts of discussion that take place online versus the face-to-face sort, owing to the scale and anonymity of online accessibility. For example, the face-to-face discussions are limited to members of the local community who can travel to the meeting, but an on-line discussion is potentially open to persons all over the world. On-line discussions also produce acrimonious exchanges far more frequently, which often degrades the discussion, sometimes to the point of exchanging insults. I cannot fully characterize these and other differences here, but I do want to acknowledge that there are some, and that my observations on public philosophy will pertain to the flesh-and-blood variety. However, I expect that much of what I will discuss applies to electronic discussions as well.

My observations on public philosophy stem from several years of involvement with various philosophy discussion forums. Probably the most relevant experience I've had is participation in a Socrates Café, the local forums that began appearing several years ago as a result of Christopher Phillips' 2002 book by that title. I've been attending these monthly meetings fairly regularly for about ten years and assumed the role of moderator four years ago. The discussions are hosted, promoted and advertised by a community library in my area and are attended by persons from a wide variety of backgrounds. Typical topics include: What is justice? Do we have a direct responsibility to the environment? What does it mean to be a responsible citizen? What is consciousness? As moderator, I might suggest ideas or relate some standard arguments to begin discussion, but mostly I let the participants carry on their own conversation. This format worked well enough that I began a similar discussion group on the campus where I am employed. "The Campus Alliance for Free Thought" operates as described above, except the discussants, consisting of faculty and students, obviously bring different perspectives to the table. Unless I say otherwise, however, I generally have the non-academic, Socrates Café forum in mind when referencing discussions in public philosophy.

I have also presented a variety of lecture/discussion events to nonacademic audiences. Local Unitarian churches frequently request these, as do some libraries. I do not count a lecture itself as a form of public philosophy as long as the attendees are only passively involved and not actually engaging in conversation. However, the discussions that follow the lecture do encourage conversation, and they provide another opportunity to see how the public reacts to particular philosophical issues.

Public philosophical forums have a unique flavor, different obviously from exchanges between professional academics, but different even than the discussion in an undergraduate philosophy classroom. In one sense, however, there is a basic similarity between a public forum and an undergraduate class: in both cases the individuals participating have little if any formal training in philosophy. Noting the salient differences between the two, I think, will reveal the unique characteristics of public forums.

In what ways, then, are the discussions in public philosophy different than those in a typical freshman class? Most obviously, the institutional nature of the university brings with it a host of parameters not found in a public forum: students are enrolled for credit, with the requirement that they demonstrate a certain mastery of the material; the relationship between professor and student is one that involves a difference in power and authority; students are compelled to take courses for their degree; texts are involved, and students are

expected to read them; lectures and discussions are usually controlled by instructors, who may focus on a particular subject for as long as they deem necessary.

In contrast, attendance at a public philosophy discussion is entirely voluntary, and the only persons in attendance are those with enough interest to travel to the destination and give up their evening. This ensures a certain level of enthusiasm on the part of all the attendees that is unlikely to occur in the classroom. But the attendees typically will not be willing or able to prepare in advance in the way of reading texts or completing assignments. And during the discussion, there is no incentive for participants to fully develop a line of thinking the way most instructors would insist upon in a classroom. It is not uncommon to watch discussants get most of the way to what seems to me to be a rewarding insight only to be derailed at the last minute and have the topic neatly changed. This is *their* discussion, and while my credentials as an academic and role as moderator give me some authority, it is not like that of the instructor in the classroom. The event, of course, could be structured so that I had more authority and steered the content according to what I thought most important, but then it would be more like persons attending a lecture, putting the attendees in a passive role, and not making them active participants. If the event is to be truly public philosophy, then the public must be doing the philosophy, not listening to the academic. I have the Socrates Café conversations in mind here, but it's worth noting that all of this can be said for similar forums on campus. Students who attend these do so out of their own curiosity, not because they receive any sort of credit for a class, and the nature of the discussion is such that they feel free to express themselves in ways they would not in a classroom. The discussion provides insights into their own interests *in the content*, rather than their interest in getting a decent grade in a course.

The discussion itself is also different than what I experience in the classroom. It follows lines determined by the discussants, who come to the discussion from many different backgrounds and levels of competence. They challenge each other, help each other clarify statements, and often discover ways of thinking about an issue that had never before occurred to them. But they are not likely to work toward even a contingent level of mutual agreement or consensus (which is not surprising since their academic counterparts are just as unlikely to do that). In a public forum, the discussants have such different backgrounds and perspectives, along with very different reasons why they find a topic of interest, that the conversation is pulled in many different directions. I am often reminded of Plato's early dialogues, in which the conversation may turn in circles and end without any resolution. Yet the journey itself leaves the participants in some sense wiser than when they started, and that's true both for Socrates and his interlocutor and the contemporary participants of a public philosophy forum.

With this description of public philosophy in mind, limited as it is to certain, relatively small-group forums, one might ask how and why the practice has value, particularly from the perspective of academic philosophy. Before raising that question, however, it will be useful to establish a philosophical framework from which to make an analysis, and for reasons I hope will become clear, I think pragmatism can very effectively fill that role.

II. Deweyan Pragmatism and the Role of Philosophy in Public Life

Referring generally to “pragmatism” or “the pragmatists” when we are well into the twenty-first is somewhat problematic. The differences between the views of the major players in this tradition are wide-ranging. In fact, as Richard J. Bernstein has argued, there is no essence to pragmatism, though this very fact also gives it a richness and variety, one that I think makes it appropriate for some of the connections I will draw between pragmatism and public philosophy.² Nevertheless, there are certain broad assumptions we can make to get started. First, the pragmatists sought to turn much of the tradition of philosophy on its head. Against the Platonic search for truth in a realm abstracted from the every-day world, the pragmatists sought to start with the messy circumstances of the world we live in. They also suggest an on-going method of arriving at beliefs through carefully crafting hypothesis, testing them through observation and refining them, as opposed to establishing fixed values or epistemological starting points. This method, having proven itself successful in the natural sciences, is carried over to traditional philosophical investigations, particularly by Peirce and Dewey. It means that our inquiries will always arrive at contingent, fallible truths. The method is also results-oriented, measuring the effectiveness of philosophy by its ability to address real problems. But perhaps the most important general characteristic of pragmatism, for our purposes, is in the pragmatists’ (particularly Dewey and Mead) conception of the social nature of the self. We become who we are through association and interaction with others, and conversation is the vital means to achieve his end.

In this section, we will review the pragmatists’ views on these issues, including a discussion on the nature of the self, the role of philosophical inquiry in private and public life, and the role of the professional philosopher in public discourse. To keep the discussion from becoming too broad I will focus on the writings of John Dewey, which I believe yield the most important insights for our purposes.

Throughout his writings, Dewey investigated the role of society in shaping the individual. “What [an individual] does, and what the consequences of his behavior are, what his experience consists of, cannot even be described, much less accounted for, in isolation.”³

Persons are not born with the innate skills that allow them to succeed in life. Rather, they develop habits—linguistic, social, emotional, and intellectual—that provide the basis for managing the world and directing their lives. That development, in turn, requires a substantial social engagement and the requisite social resources.

The development of the self is not a process of achieving some finished end. Whether one is pursuing understanding through the sciences or other professional disciplines or one is enhancing one's personal abilities and experiences, the pragmatic method aims at continual growth. We should never expect to cease learning and therefore should never expect to cease our investigations. "Intelligence is not something possessed once for all. It is in constant process of forming, and its retention requires constant alertness in observing consequences, an open-minded will to learn and courage in readjustment."⁴ In our personal lives, the goal of any thinking person is clear: pursue education as a life-long goal. For Dewey, there is no state of "being educated," as if that were a terminal set of experiences. Without getting too deep into Dewey's considerable work in the theory of education, it's important to note that he thinks learning should extend beyond the formal, institutionalized education we require of our youth. The goal of education is continual growth, and a society that takes this task seriously must provide the opportunities to pursue that at every stage of life.⁵

Personal growth obviously requires a healthy society. We establish meaningful social identities by participating in various public groups, from local communities to the nation as a whole. As social beings, we are extremely dependent on our communities, which must be "emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained."⁶ At bottom, this means we must establish *associations* in which persons form common values and meaning. Such associations keep societies operating as communities while they give individuals a sense of purpose. The importance of democracy in Dewey's worldview is the culmination of his views on the relationship between individuals and their society: democratic participation is the means by which individuals create these healthy associations. This is bolstered by the social nature of the self and Dewey's anti-essentialist sensibilities. No *a priori* principles will determine the nature of a just society. Working from real-world situations, democracy consists of persons participating in their community, thereby making it *their* community.

And conversation is perhaps the most important way in which we might achieve this sense of democratic association. Of course, there are many kinds of conversation, and much of what counts as public, democratic discourse as it is today is not what the pragmatists have in mind. Political ads, particularly those in the United States, are funded by powerful, moneyed (often anonymous) interests, which aim to persuade through any means necessary.

But the sort of discourse that the pragmatists envision is like the coercion-free discourse that Habermas advocates, whereby participants engage each other to advance mutual understanding. This is similar to the experimentalism Dewey advocates generally: pursuit of understanding guided by intelligent examination of views and attention to how they work in the real world. Through these exchanges we develop increasingly effective ends, but they're also valuable for the effect they have on individuals participating in them. Dewey characterizes them as "genuine conversation":

But in genuine conversation the ideas of one are corrected and changed by what others say; what is confirmed is not his previous notions, which may have been narrow and ill-formed, but his capacity to judge wisely. What he gains is an expansion of experience; he learns; even if previous ideas are in the main confirmed, yet in the degree in which there is genuine mutual give and take they are seen in a new light, deepened and extended in meaning, and there is the enjoyment of enlargement of experience, of growth of capacity.⁷

Note the way in which this form of conversation simultaneously deepens links between the discussants while at the same time "enlarging the experience" of the individuals. And this is not just a discussion of professional academics or elites; it is the activity of the public itself. Cornel West, in arguing for his own version of pragmatism influenced in part by Dewey, emphasizes that "the prerogative of philosophers, i.e. rational deliberation, is now that of the people—and the populace deliberating is creative democracy in the making."⁸ West does not think that Dewey goes far enough in providing an understanding of social conditions and revolutionary possibilities that he sees as central to the success of pragmatic conversation, but he nevertheless sees Dewey's concept of intelligent discourse as a necessary basis for addressing public problems.⁹ The Deweyan tradition, in short, sees conversation as a way to achieve the community upon which a legitimate democracy can operate.

Note that for Dewey, genuine conversation was a way to obtain substantive solutions to real-world problems. By persons articulating and sharing concerns, we are better able to find a way to deal with them. The experimental method could then be applied to discover and hone solutions. More recent pragmatists see the goal of deliberation in more general terms. Richard Rorty sees the lessons of pragmatism in teaching us to continue to find vocabularies that allow us to better understand the world and to root out exhausted and fruitless vocabularies. For Rorty, the conversation ought not to be judged by its ability to accomplish specific goals, and certainly not as a means of bringing us to the Truth. Rather, it is in itself a worthwhile means of advancing meaningful ways to look at the world. "The

pragmatists tell us that the conversation which it is our moral duty to continue is *merely* our project, the European intellectual's form of life. . . Further (and this is the crucial point) *we do not know what 'success' would mean except simply 'continuance.'* We are not conversing because we have a goal, but because Socratic conversation is an activity which is its *own* end."¹⁰ Many commentators question whether this view of conversation is consistent with Dewey's, a point I will return to shortly, but for our purposes it is important to note that maintaining conversations lies at the center of the pragmatists' sense of how healthy societies function.

What then, is the role of the professional philosopher in all of this? It is, first of all, not that of the traditional Platonic or Enlightenment-era philosophers, pursuing their own esoteric theories in the isolation of the ivory tower. With regard to the content of philosophy, philosophers must orient themselves to the problems of their contemporaries. As Dewey states, "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men."¹¹ He would have us abandon the esoteric subject matter that largely constitutes the tradition. But it's not just an issue of content; Dewey would have professional philosophers facilitate the development of social ends and the means to accomplish them among the public. "Unless professional philosophy can mobilize itself sufficiently to assist in this clarification and redirection of men's thoughts it is likely to get more and more sidetracked from the main currents of contemporary life."¹² Philosophers are in a position to make connections between values and practices, providing explanations that enable us to better comprehend and control the forces that affect our lives. As Kenneth Stikkers explains, the Deweyan view of the responsibility of philosophers is to bring the public "to self-awareness through the use of traditional cultural symbols and the forging of new symbols to create shared meanings and feelings of common interest."¹³ In short, professional philosophers in the pragmatic tradition ought to facilitate the genuine conversation discussed above, and hopefully on a scale large enough to make a difference.

But if this is the task of the professional philosopher, it is by no means constrained to the traditional discipline of philosophy. In fact, one of the enduring lessons of the pragmatic tradition has been the interdisciplinary nature of conversations both in and out of academia. Philosophy has no privileged role in solving problems. Dewey, for example, used discoveries in biology to further his views on language, art and education. Contemporary philosophers, particularly Rorty, have been more strident about this. Rorty, in fact, admonishes his professional peers for their self-absorption.

Ceasing to worry about the autonomy of philosophy means, among other things, no longer wanting to draw nice clear lines between philosophical questions and political, religious, aesthetic, or economic questions. Philosophy will not play the modest but essential role that Dewey assigned it, and so will not succeed in taking time seriously, unless we philosophers are willing to accept a certain deprofessionalization and to acquire a certain insouciance about the question of when we are doing philosophy and when we are not.¹⁴

Understanding the world, attempting to find better vocabularies, or finding ways to set and achieve goals may require that we draw from science, art, philosophy or literature, according to Rorty. Philosophy has no privileged vocabulary to guide them all.

Note that there is some disagreement among pragmatists about whether Rorty's contemporary take on the role of philosophers can rightly be linked to Dewey, and this disagreement will bear on our application of pragmatism to public philosophy in the next section. Rorty claims that he gets from Dewey his rejection of philosophy as a privileged method. Furthermore, he thinks that a pragmatist culture "would contain nobody called 'the Philosopher' who could explain why and how certain areas of culture enjoyed a special relation to reality."¹⁵ Rorty has been often criticized for this view, both on the grounds of its own plausibility and on how Deweyan this view really is. James Campbell is one of many who objects to Rorty's vague reference to pragmatists, asserting that "the stance suggested by Rorty is often so unpragmatic, at least in the historical sense, that I am led to wonder who these pragmatists are."¹⁶ Campbell's concern centers on Rorty's insistence that pragmatism abandons any sense of a privileged method, despite the fact that Dewey advocates for the pragmatic method again and again. Gouinlock, makes a similar point, arguing that throughout his works, Dewey advocated for the scientific method as a preferred and effective means of resolving real-world difficulties. This method is essentially an empiricism, anchored in a careful attention to the experienced results of our various sorts of "hypotheses." If Gouinlock is right about Dewey, then Dewey would seem to have a stronger sense of practical purpose for pragmatic philosophy and the effectiveness of its method than Rorty acknowledges. Gouinlock's reading of Dewey would suggest that some conversations are more worthwhile than others, specifically those directed by this method. "The idea of democratic method and aim as mere conversation was, in effect, rigorously opposed by Dewey," claims Gouinlock.¹⁷

There is, then, some difference about the sort of discourse that a Deweyan pragmatic philosophy should engage in. Some, like Gouinlock, suggest that there is a specific method, one with definite intellectual virtues that are inspired by the scientific method. "The virtues

include a willingness to question, investigate, and learn; a determination to search for clarity in discourse and evidence in argument.”¹⁸ Rorty, on the other hand, does not think that what Dewey advocates really amounts to a method at all, and that there really is nothing special about a philosophical conversation that would make it more effective than those of any other discipline. Regardless of where one stands on this issue, however, there is no doubting that all pragmatists think that intellectual inquiry in general should not be enclosed within isolated disciplines. In fact, contemporary philosophers who share this element of pragmatism (like Habermas) invoke the works of sociologists and psychologists as readily as those of the philosophical tradition. The pragmatic process of deliberation is, then, decidedly interdisciplinary, even if there are disagreements about whether pragmatism must include a particular method.

To conclude, we can characterize the pragmatic perspective as I have been articulating it here with the following summary statements. a) Pragmatism involves a method whereby beliefs and values are considered contingent and open to revision in an ongoing process of experimental revision and open, interdisciplinary conversation. b) Pragmatism envisions a democratic society wherein individuals form community through direct association, determining the saliency of issues and guiding values through public deliberation. c) Individual in these societies aim at continual intellectual development and growth, largely through the development of healthy habits that stem from participation in the community. d) Professional philosophers ought to prioritize their efforts according to the real-world needs and conditions of their society, acknowledging that the discipline is no longer the Queen of the Sciences and that they ought to welcome the insights of other disciplines.

III. The Value of Public Philosophy from the Pragmatic Perspective

The four summary descriptions of pragmatism in the preceding paragraph can be used to shed light on the practice of public philosophy as that was described in section I. What is the value of public philosophy, from the pragmatists’ perspective?

a) The Pragmatic Method

The public discourse of philosophical themes in many ways makes assumptions similar to what the pragmatists call for in the pursuit of understanding. But in saying this I fully acknowledge it is *not* true of the individuals who constitute these discussion groups. Most are not acquainted with pragmatism, and I have no sense that they would subscribe to it if they were. In fact, as individuals, the discussants in public gatherings are without a common epistemological bent. Some are trained scientists, some are dedicated to religious outlooks,

some have almost a Platonic disposition toward truth, some are committed skeptics, etc. So if we're looking for the pragmatic perspective as a conscious set of assumptions that everyone has agreed to follow, you are unlikely to find it. However, I would contend that the nature of the discussion, in its *group* dynamic, does invoke the characteristics of the pragmatic method described in the previous section.

First, discussants realize that they are in a public forum and that others seated around the table may well have different views than their own. They expect that others are going to disagree on some things and agree on others, and most who care to attend such an event are mindful of that. My limited experience with online forums is that there is less toleration for differences, but as a whole one can say that in either case there are no expectations of fixed starting points or epistemological orientations. The discussion must be open to a variety of inputs. The group as a whole will continue to pursue a line of thinking because it bears fruit—it's one that makes sense to most of the discussants—and will quickly abandon views that seem overly idiosyncratic or unsupportable. Nevertheless they are willing to consider almost anything. This sort of open-mindedness is exactly the quality that Gouinlock identifies as a principle part of the pragmatic method, "a readiness to hear and respect the views of others, to consider alternatives thoroughly and impartially, and to communicate in a like manner in return."¹⁹

More, the group's varied backgrounds mean that no one discipline is privileged. Those who attend these discussions generally have some intellectual curiosity to begin with, and that means they are likely to pay attention to developments in science and current events. Most are educated outside of philosophy, though some either do read philosophy or have done so at some point. All of this they bring with them to the discussion. So while I may introduce an argument from the philosophical tradition as a means of getting a discussion going, the discussants are as likely to reply with a news item, some science they are aware of, or a personal experience. The discussions, then, are essentially interdisciplinary, and no one sort of claim is privileged in the group. Even if the issue under discussion is from a professional philosopher's perspective wholly philosophical (e.g., what is beauty?), it is not uncommon that the discussion will follow a purely scientific debate at some point (e.g., do people see the world as animals do?). This sort of play between traditional philosophical discussions and other disciplines, particularly science, is precisely what Dewey had in mind as the best direction for philosophy. "Pragmatism is content to take its stand with science" on issues about matters concerning reality, Dewey states, in that there is an openness to all forms of investigation and the gathering of relevant data.²⁰

And finally, a line of questioning does not last long if it's too esoteric. Participants tend to steer the conversation according to what is pertinent to their interests or those of their community. The close association of value and inquiry in pragmatism is faithfully mirrored here: the discussion is driven by what matters to the lives of those engaging the conversation. In fact, conversations tend to return frequently to normative concerns, and in general ethical issues are the most popular in discussion groups where the participants pick the topic.

So in these ways the discussion resembles the method of inquiry promoted by the pragmatists. One way in which it is not, however, is in the lack of a structure that would see an investigation carried out to some practical consequence. Quite frankly, nothing is ever really solved, and nothing tangible ever gets done. But this is not the purpose of the discussion in the first place. They are not like a committee assigned with a task, but a group of people engaging in philosophical-based discussion for its own sake. Whether that makes the endeavor worthwhile or not I will soon address.

b) Public Philosophy's Contribution to Democracy

For Dewey, the value of philosophy for society was in its ability to promote a "genuine conversation," creating the basis for a democratic community. Are the sort of community exchanges I have been describing a Deweyan genuine conversation? Yes. Can they affect the restoration of a healthy democracy? I have to admit that I think they cannot. In this section I will explain my mixed views on this topic.

A public philosophical discussion is a genuine conversation, in the sense that its main goal is for persons to listen to what others say and learn something, as well as to hear how others react to their own views. Sometimes minds are changed, but as often as not the discussants merely get a better understanding of why they think the way they do. Still, this is an expected outcome of genuine conversation. Recall Dewey's description: "even if previous ideas are in the main confirmed, yet in the degree in which there is genuine mutual give and take they are seen in a new light deepened and extended in meaning, and there is the enjoyment of enlargement of experience, of growth of capacity." This is a very good description of what I believe many take away from the public discussions I have witnessed.

The regulars of such a group get to know one another, intellectually if not personally, and seem to respect one another even if they do not agree. Within these groups, it's clear that there is an intellectual community that could be the model for a meaningful democracy. This is never truer than when the discussion turns political and there are opposing views on

the table. Even when the disagreement is vehement, there is always an attempt to understand the opposing position. The nature of a philosophical discussion, giving reasons and asking others for their, invites understanding if not agreement. Compare these exchanges to televised political debates in an election season, or the barrage of disparaging television ads that lead up to elections. A Socrates Café in its most acrimonious moments is a far cry from these.

But I do not think that these public forums can achieve the lofty goal of enhancing democracy for the society overall. The reason is that the persons who probably most need to enter into these conversations do not attend them, and I see no way of inducing them to do so. The Socrates Café events I moderate are well-advertised (each meeting is announced in the local paper), but the largest gatherings rarely amount to more than twenty persons. Sometimes there is only a handful. The same can be said for student groups. Granted, I am not located in the heart of a major city, but no place that I am aware of enjoys public philosophical discussions on a scale large enough to substantially affect the political process of the entire community, even if one adds electronic forms of discussion to the total. Many persons simply have no interest in these sorts of discussions, and I will venture to guess that those who are most entrenched in their positions are not likely to engage in the sort of probing that attracts those who relish the conversation. Recall that creating associations is the purpose of democratic conversations. As Dewey states, “The prime difficulty, as we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests.”²¹ Simply offering these public exchanges does not do much to unite or express the interests of the public at large, only a small part of it at best.

The degree of interest in philosophical conversation is an empirical issue for which I can only offer anecdotal evidence, but I think it is safe to say that offering public philosophical forums will not spark genuine conversation on the scale necessary to mend an ailing democracy. To achieve *that* we would need additional incentives from a source with enough pull to entice or compel a much larger portion of the population to talk. What that source would be and whether we really want it to do this are, of course, issues far beyond what I can address here.

c) The Benefits of Public Philosophy to Individuals

So the public forums I have been discussing will not likely benefit the public overall in a substantial way, but can we at least say that public philosophy discussions are beneficial for those individuals who *do* pursue them? Here the debate on whether Rorty is right to eschew

a particular method in philosophy may bear on our answer. According to one line of thinking, staying true to Dewey means expecting that our conversations will have some sort of measureable impact. People's lives will be made better because we articulated difficulties and found solutions. Dewey often sounds like this is what he expects from the sorts of conversations he proposes. We should have *effective* conversations, not *mere* conversations. If the sort of public philosophy forums I have been discussing do not produce any measureable difference in the world, perhaps they are of no real benefit.

But if Rorty is right, perhaps the continuing of conversation *is* a real benefit. If public conversations broaden and deepen understanding and allow people to discover new vocabularies, that may be by itself a worthwhile endeavor. Maybe Rorty's pragmatism, with less expectations for what conversation can do, provides a better basis to appreciate the benefit of "mere conversation" to individuals who engage in it.

I think, however, that one need not follow Rorty to see the benefit of these conversations. One could argue that public philosophy is indeed a benefit no matter how disposed you are to stick to Deweyan roots. First, it should be noted that Dewey does not think that philosophy, even professional philosophy, is directly a matter of solving problems. Rather, it provides the basic visions of what sorts of persons we should be and what sort of a society we should live in. We must, indeed, keep sight of the real conditions of life that we live in, but thinking about the big questions helps provide the perspective and direction for more practical endeavors.

When it is understood that philosophic thinking is caught up in the actual course of events, having the office of guiding them towards a prosperous issue, problems will abundantly present themselves. Philosophy will not solves these problems; philosophy is vision, imagination, reflection—and these functions, apart from action, modify nothing and hence resolve nothing. But in a complicated and perverse world, action which is not informed with vision, imagination, and reflection, is more likely to increase confusion and conflict than to straighten things out.²²

But even if public philosophy cannot even do that—provide its participants with a better vision of how we should live—there is yet another way in which it would be beneficial on Deweyan grounds: as a form of personal growth. If Dewey is right, then one of our most important goals in life is continual growth, and this is just what Dewey expects genuine conversation to achieve: "the enjoyment of enlargement of experience, of growth of capacity." In this way, such forums provide a resource that allows persons to continue the process of education beyond the walls of schools and universities, and Dewey thinks such

resources are vital to a healthy society. “Hence, education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age.”²³

In fact, my experience suggests that many persons find these discussions deeply satisfying. At one recent Socrates Café meeting, in preparation for this very essay, I asked the attendees if and why they thought our conversations were valuable. No one indicated that they attended out of some sense of responsibility for democratic progress or community-building, even when I directly asked that. The common reply was that they attended out of their own curiosity. They wanted to hear what others had to say about the topics we discuss, and in general they just thought the discussions were “interesting.” That sort of response—that they attend because it is personally satisfying to do so—I have heard for years. With student discussion groups, I have been told by more than one student that he or she looks forward to the regular meetings as the high point of the week. All of this corroborates Dewey’s sense that genuine conversation aimed at growth is an inherently satisfying human activity.

d) The Role of Professional Philosophers in Public Philosophy

What, then, of the role of the professional philosopher in the sort of public philosophy exchanges I am describing? It surely matters what sort of philosopher you are. If you think the main role, or only role, of professional philosophy is to advance our understanding of conceptual matters through careful and sustained inquiry with your fellow professionals, producing the sort of work found in journals and academic presses, then public philosophy will hold little interest for you. The discussions are frankly too unstructured and often too elementary. I do not object to this form of professional philosophy, however. I think there is value in it, and I engage in it myself. But if you are sympathetic to the Deweyan pragmatic perspective I have been explaining, you may find there really is interest in what happens in these public conversations.

First, academic philosophers do certainly contribute to public discussions that bear on philosophical topics. In fact, some professionals frequently put themselves before the public to help further our larger conversations: Peter Singer, Cornel West, the various contributors to *The New York Times*’s “The Stone” opinion section, etc. These philosophers are lucky enough to have their views conveyed through the major media, and it is this sort of contribution that Deweyan pragmatists would consider to be extremely important, especially if it helps generate large scale awareness and discussion of salient issues. This would be an example of philosophers helping to articulate what social problems are, applying their skills to the solution of real-world problems. But this

is not public philosophy as it has been pursued in this paper. Rather, these activities are philosophers using their expertise to inform and perhaps steer discussions of public opinion. From the pragmatists' perspective, this sort of contribution should be encouraged. But we might better describe its value in terms of the professional philosopher's contribution to public policy discussions, as opposed to the value of a professional philosophers' presence in a discussion among non-philosophers. This is a matter of social distance. Writing an article in a newspaper or having a lecture appear on YouTube gives the public something to talk about. Actively participating in a direct conversation allows the philosopher to interact directly with the discussants.

So what about that latter sort of contribution—the professional's participation in public philosophical forums, which are usually small and not likely to shape public opinion or policy in a substantial manner? Firstly, there is a potential value to professional philosophers themselves. In attending public forums, one gets a sense of what is relevant to people in our contemporary society. As I pointed out earlier, discussants usually have little patience for conversations that become too esoteric and removed from their living concerns. They do like to discuss philosophical topics, but they do so because it matters to them. If Dewey is right that philosophers must pay attention to the needs of the citizenry in their practice of philosophy, then listening to how the nonprofessionals receive and apply philosophical ideas to their lives might influence what we professionals consider worthwhile areas of investigation. Rorty urges us to be open to the contributions of disciplines like science and art as we pursue our philosophy, and the open, interdisciplinary nature of public philosophy might be enjoyed in that vein.

Secondly, the discussants can benefit substantially from the participation of a professional philosopher. Because we professionals are familiar with traditional arguments and theories and are skilled at thinking through these issues, we can make an effective contribution to the conversations among intellectually curious individuals. We can explain well-worn paths and where they have led. We can point out improper use of evidence and faulty argumentation. As I pointed out earlier, this may not contribute to the furthering of democracy at the level that Dewey had hoped for (where the public itself overcomes its divided interests through renewed associations), but it furthers the exploration that the participants hoped for when they showed up. By actively participating in public forums, then, we professionals are effectively making ourselves a resource for growth.

In conclusion, I have suggested that a Deweyan version of pragmatism provides a useful perspective from which to think about the character and value of public philosophy. Thinking particularly about relatively small, person-to-person philosophical forums, I argue

that as a group they share the main assumptions of the pragmatic method: a prevailing contingency with regard to starting points and conclusions, a willingness to entertain evidence from various sources and disciplines, and a commitment to continuing conversation on a variety of issues for the sake of continued growth and expansion of understanding. I believe it is unlikely that these sorts of conversations will deliver any immediate or obvious results in terms of improved democratic processes at the level of an entire community or nation because of the small scale and relatively narrow appeal. However, as a resource for intellectual growth, public philosophical forums provide an invaluable resource for those individuals willing to participate. Professional philosophers, at least those who share something of the pragmatists' view on philosophy, might benefit from listening to public philosophy exchanges, but their active participation in them is certainly a benefit to all concerned.

Notes

¹ Jaweed Kaleem, "Keeping Alive the Big Questions," Huffington Post, September 7, 2013. Accessed Oct. 9, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/07/big-questions_n_3886381.html.

² Richard J. Bernstein, "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 61.

³ John Dewey, *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, Ed. James Gouinlock, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), 110.

⁴ *Ibid*, 133.

⁵ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (New York: Mentor Books, 1951), 146. See also James Cambell, *Understanding John Dewey*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 133-142.

⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 2, 1925-1927, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 246.

⁷ John Dewey, *Moral Writings*, 190.

⁸ Cornel West, "Why Pragmatism?," in *The Cornel West Reader*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 151.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 158.

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- ¹⁰ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 172.
- ¹¹ John Dewey, “The Need for Recovery of Philosophy,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 10.
- ¹² John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” 3.
- ¹³ Kenneth Stickers, “John Dewey and the Public Responsibility of Intellectuals”, *Ethics & Politics*, XII 1 (2010): 205.
- ¹⁴ Richard Rorty, “Philosophy and the Future,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 201.
- ¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism*, xxxix.
- ¹⁶ James Campbell, “Rorty’s Use of Dewey,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, 175.
- ¹⁷ James Gouinlock, “What is the Legacy of Instrumentalism? Rorty’s Interpretation of Dewey,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 89.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, 88.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*.
- ²⁰ John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” 8.
- ²¹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 327.
- ²² John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” 10.
- ²³ John Dewey, “Education as Growth,” in *Democracy and Education, John Dewey: The Middle Works*, 497.